DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 399 RC 019 824

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TITLE Electronic Field Trips: Using Technology To Enhance Classroom Instruction.
PUB DATE Oct 94
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Rural Education Association (86th, Salt Lake City, UT, October 3-8, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Distance Education; Elementary Secondary Education; *Instructional Innovation; Learning Activities; Program Development; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; *Teleconferencing
IDENTIFIERS *Oklahoma; *Technology Based Instruction

ABSTRACT

Thirty-three member schools of the Organization of Rural Oklahoma Schools cooperated in the creation of six school networks that participated in a series of electronic "field trips" for rural students. The field trips were actually conference telephone calls that allowed students and teachers to talk with experts in areas such as politics, the arts, the sciences, and the world of work. At a 1-day training session, attendees learned how to utilize the electronic field trips to enhance classroom instruction, how to prepare students for the field trips, and how to evaluate the experience in light of district and state educational goals. Students participated in at least four field trips; some were designed for elementary students, others for secondary students. An evaluation form mailed to all participating schools showed that the field trips expanded students' knowledge, that listening and speaking skills were improved, and that the speakers represented valuable role models for the students. Field trips were not as useful in helping students improve writing skills or increase their understanding of global interdependence. All respondents indicated they would like to see the program continue. (TD)

ELECTRONIC FIELD TRIPS: USING TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

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ELECTRONIC FIELD TRIPS: CREATING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURAL STUDENTS

Rural schools are located in every state, and almost every county, throughout the United States and represent a very diverse population with a variety of needs and concerns. Because of the very nature of rural schools and rural issues which are associated with isolation, health concerns, poverty, and high educational costs, many rural schools and students are confronted with a multitude of societal and educational problems. The report, The Condition of Education in Rural Schools (1994), paints a sometimes bleak picture of rural education.

The effective use of technology is one way to overcome some rural problems. Vaughan, Beothel, Hoover, Lawson, and Tones (1989) indicated that technology can overcome the problems of rural isolation as well as issues associated with several financial limitations and the need for specialized courses for few students. Beckner and Barker (1994) supported this belief that techology is of great importance to rural schools.

The Center for the Study of Small/Rural Schools at the University of Oklahoma, in response to the rural issues identified in the literature, sought and received partial funding from the Southwestern Bell Foundation to work with selected rural school districts who were members of the Organization of Rural Oklahoma Schools (OROS). The funding was to facilitate the creation of collaborative networks of rural schools which would participate in a series of electronic "field trips" for rural school students. The "field trips" were actually conference telephone calls which allowed students and

teachers in the several rural networks to talk with experts in areas such as politics, the arts, the sciences, and the world of work. Selected experts shared their knowledge, provided guidance, and answered questions.

Since the grant was for the 1993-94 school year and was not received until late in the fall of 1993, it was necessary to hold informational and training sessions during the fall and conduct the actual "field trips" in the spring of 1994. All school districts who were members of the Organization of Rural Oklahoma Schools were invited to attend a one-day training and planning session. Six rural networks were also established at this meeting. A total of thirty-three schools agreed to participate in the project.

The one-day training session focused on how to utilize the electronic "field trips" to expand and enhance classroom instruction as well as how to prepare students for the "field trips". Attendees also learned how to process with students after the "field trip" and how to evaluate the experience in light of district and state identified educational goals. A list of potential speakers was generated and plans were made for initiating the implementation stage.

The implementation stage for the electronic "field trips" began in the spring of 1994. Students at each of the six networks participated in minimally four "field trips." Some of the "field trips" were designed for elementary students while others were designed for secondary students. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the project was providing adequate speakers for each electronic "field trip". But given this one issue, the "field trips" were very successful and provided students a glimpse of a world

beyond that of their rural community. The "field trip" presenters included the Governor of the State of Oklahoma as well as other noted politicians such as the Speaker of the House, the Chairman of the Corporation Commission, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the Lieutenant Governor. But, not all of the speakers were politicians. Other presenters included an astronaut, a Native-American artist, an author of children's books, and a warden of a state prison. Foreign viewpoints were well represented when speakers from embassies such as Great Britain, Spain, Norway, Israel, and Switzerland participated in the "field trips". Many of the "field trip" speakers agreed to participate in more than one meeting. All were enthusiastic and supportive of the students and agreed that the "field trips" were valuable. The Governor indicated that the "field trip" had renewed his spirit and was a wonderful experience.

Costs to each school district were minimal. Districts were asked to pay for their portion of the conference call and where necessary supply a speaker phone for the students. As an average, each "field trip" lasted one hour and cost $15-$20. All of the schools indicated that this was minimal and that the project served an important purpose.

After the "field trips" were over, students, teachers, and administrators were randomly contacted to determine their evaluation of the project. In addition, a formal evaluation instrument was mailed to each school district. The interviews elicited the following types of comments:

Administrator: *The field trip was very educational. It was an excellent learning opportunity for our students. The teachers were able to use the information to supplement the existing curriculum.*

Administrator: *Our experience was very positive and I felt the participating students were able to learn a great deal from their interactions with the political officials and dignitaries. . . I hope that we will be able to participate in a similar endeavor in the future.*

Teacher: *The field trips were great! We taped them and put the tapes in our library for all the students to use.*

Teacher: *The field trips were a worthwhile project. My students were able to expand their knowledge base. They were very impressed with the speakers.*

Student: *We were able to visit with people we see on television and it gave me a better understanding of our state government.*

Student: *The field trips were exciting. It was wonderful to speak to people like Dr. Shannon Lucid and Kelly Haney.*

The formal evaluation instrument was mailed to all participating school districts. In spite of the lateness in the school year, 81% (N = 27) were returned. The evaluation instrument utilized a Likert type scale with one being the lowest and five the highest. The table below provides the results of the study. Most interesting is that the vast majority indicated the "field trips" expanded students' knowledge, that listening and speaking skills were improved, and that the speakers represented valuable role models for the students. As can be seen from the table, the "field trips" were not as useful in helping students improve their writing skills or increase their understanding of a global interdependence. Also, the "field trips" were not utilized as fully as possible in expanding the existing curriculum. Rather, it seems that for a few

districts the "field trips" were viewed as activities and not as a curricular component. The evaluation instrument also provided an opportunity for written responses. One hundred percent of the respondees indicated they would like to see the electronic "field trips" continue. Some of the written comments were very interesting because the schools provided information relating to how the "field trips" were further utilized in their separate school districts. Some students made presentations to other students regarding the "field trips;" some wrote newspaper articles about their "field trips;" and some students spoke to community groups regarding their "field trips."

TABLE 1: EVALUATION OF ELECTRONIC FIELD TRIPS

Respondents N = 27, 81.82%

	LOW 1	2	3	4	HIGH 5
1. The trips helped expand students' knowledge of a variety of subjects.			11.11% N = 3	55.56% N = 15	33.33% N = 9
2. The trips helped to expand writing opportunities.	7.41% N = 2	11.11% N = 3	29.63% N = 8	44.44% N = 12	7.41% N = 2
3. Listening skills were improved.			11.11% N = 3	48.15% N = 13	40.74% N = 11
4. Speaking skills were improved.			22.22% N = 6	59.26% N = 16	18.52% N = 5
5. Interviewing skills were enhanced.			14.81% N = 4	48.15% N = 13	37.04% N = 10
6. Research opportunities were made possible.			29.63% N = 8	51.85% N = 14	18.52% N = 5
7. Student awareness of global interdependence was increased.	3.70% N = 1	11.11% N = 3	22.22% N = 6	40.74% N = 11	22.22% N = 6
8. The speakers of this project provided role models for a diverse student population.			14.82% N = 4	33.33% N = 9	51.85% N = 14
9. The field trips were used to expand existing curriculum.	3.70% N = 1	11.11% N = 3	25.93% N = 7	33.33% N = 9	25.93% N = 7
10. Students developed a better understanding of government.		3.70% N = 1	14.82% N = 4	48.15% N = 13	33.33% N = 9

The electronic "field trips" coordinated and provided by the Center for the Study of Small/Rural Schools at the University of Oklahoma were successful because they broadened the world of rural students and directly addressed the issue of academic and personal isolation. They were cost effective for rural school districts and provided students an opportunity to share their knowledge and inquiries with others. Although

this project did not represent a true "high tech" approach, it did show what could be done to provide rural students an opportunity to expand their horizons. Both the presenters and students enjoyed the "field trips" and found the experience a rewarding one. The students will remember the ' field trips" and truly learned from them. After all, isn't that what education is designed to accomplish?

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